

CIA Shifts Role in Vietnam

Emphasis To Be Put On Spying

By William Tuohy
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SAIGON—The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency is shifting toward a more traditional role in Vietnam—spying. Or, more formally, intelligence gathering and analysis, and clandestine operations.

For years, the CIA has been involved in a variety of so-called "open" activities not generally associated with the classic secret missions of the agency.

It was not because it wanted more power and authority that the CIA got involved in such things as training Vietnamese Revolutionary Development teams; it got involved because no other U.S. agency was equipped to handle them. Also it had more money and better men.

"They were given these assignments because there was simply no one else, and they had the money," one observer here said.

Another official familiar with the workings of the U.S. Mission added:

"They perform better than any other civilian agency in

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CIA From F1

Vietnam. They have better guys and a smaller operation with relatively flexible procedure—so they can zero in on a problem without being hampered by a huge bureaucratic framework."

As a consequence, the "spooks" as CIA types are generally called, were asked to perform a growing number of overt tasks as the United States became more deeply involved in fighting the Communist-directed "war of national liberation" in Vietnam.

The CIA did not get involved voluntarily. This was partly because some of its officers already were in place with cover jobs as trainers and would have to come out into the open. And partly because the agency does not like to get mixed up in long-term, open-ended programs such as the Revolutionary Development setup. And, when it did get the job, the military bridled at what it obviously felt was intervention in its special field.

The CIA men tend to be a special breed. In the field, they run to tall, lean, suntanned types who characteristically respond to introductions with a tight-lipped: "John Smith, embassy."

In Saigon, they tend to live together in apartment blocks or compounds, keeping to themselves professionally and socially, aloof from outsiders.

"There's no particular mystique about them," one insider said. "They have the same problems everyone else does: they worry about their families at home, paying the mortgage on the house, getting their kids through school. The divorce rate is high. One man on his second tour who likes the work and would extend if possible was told by his wife that he better get home after this tour is up if he still wants a wife."

"In Saigon, the agency has its own warehouse filled with interesting weapons and gadgets. It has its own clinic staffed with a doctor and three nurses. It has its own airline, Air America, which also serves as a contract carrier for the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID).

"Man for man," a top U.S. official said, "the agency has the best people in Vietnam. They are the most motivated, the most interested, and, dollar for dollar, the U.S. gets the most value out of them."

Another person familiar with the agency added:

"The spooks are less naive and more cynical than the foreign service officers. They tend to assume that nothing is permanent, people shift sides, few idealists hang on to their ideals when the going gets rough. The trouble is too many of them—like the rest of the American establishment here—are Europe-oriented, and they tend to impose Western solutions on an Eastern society."

However, in addition to classic functions, the CIA has at various times in Vietnam supplied funds and manpower to train montagnard tribal troops, provided political reporting from the provinces; trained the police special branch, the counterintelligence arm; set up the Revolutionary Development centers and trained the 50-man teams; helped establish Operation Phoenix, the local intelligence apparatus designed to attack the Vietcong infrastructure; trained so-called provincial reconnaissance units, the counterterror teams who assassinate enemy leaders; advised at the national interrogation center where enemy prisoners are questioned, and supplied the basic intelligence on the activities of the National Liberation Front.

Also, the CIA has lent some 150 or so of its officers to work for CORDS, the U.S. pacification advisory effort. Thus a CIA man might be a regional director or senior province adviser, doing the same job as a foreign service officer, an army lieutenant colonel, or an Aid man—all of whom serve as provincial advisers in the pacification program.

The agency formerly had the responsibility for inserting Vietnamese spy teams in North Vietnam, but the job is now run by the U.S. military.

The CIA's involvement in Vietnam affairs began in 1954-55 when Edward G. Lansdale,

a CIA man, first argued that President Ngo Dinh Diem could establish a stable government in that chaotic period.

His arguments won out over opposing views from the State Department and military. So the U.S. began assisting South Vietnam.

In the late 1950s, the CIA funded the Michigan State University program to train the Vietnamese police force. The police have always been low on the priority list here, despite the fact that many counterinsurgency experts believe that a first-rate police force is more necessary than a good army.

The agency also trained the police special branch.

As one observer put it: "You can't expect a retired Chicago police captain working for AID to know much about setting up intelligence networks. So the spooks got the job."

The CIA's reputation reached a low point in Vietnam in 1963 when Diem's secret police helped repress the Buddhists, and the CIA station chief, as the director in each country is called, drew public criticism though President Kennedy later commended him.

There was some grumbling at the time that the station chief was trying to establish his own foreign policy.

But that period passed, and, since then, the four subse-

quent station chiefs have all worked well with the U.S. ambassador.

In the early 1960s the CIA took over the burden of training and arming the montagnards, the tribal people who live along highland border infiltration routes and who were traditionally antipathetic to Vietnamese leadership. Later, the montagnard training mission was turned over to the army's special forces.

The agency's role in the Revolutionary Development program grew out of an experiment by two energetic Americans who worked for the U.S. Information Agency.

Working with the youth branch of a local political party in Quangnai province, they gave intensive, motivational training to 30-man groups known as PAT, or political action teams.

The teams were designed to counter Vietcong activity in the hamlets and win the people over to the government. They were remarkably successful in Quangnai.

Pacification experts then decided to mass-produce such teams for all of Vietnam's differing provinces. But the job was too delicate for the U.S. Information Agency.

"It really wasn't our line," explains one USIA official.

"What if Indira Gandhi, say, learned that the USIA was arming Vietnamese peasants to fight other Vietnamese. She

might decide that our personnel in India was up to the same trick."

The CIA did not want to get involved in the Revolutionary Development program either.

But then Dep. Ambassador U. Alexis Johnson decided to hand the CIA the responsibility.

"Johnson knew that if you wanted to get a job done, you got the agency to do it," said an embassy man.

After that, the CIA's "paras"—paramilitary types—began arriving in Vietnam to work in the program.

"I began running into guys I hadn't seen since China, Burma, and the Chinese offshore islands," one old East Asian hand remarked.

At first the program ran afoul of the military and Gen. William C. Westmoreland, then U.S. military commander in Vietnam and now army chief of staff.

"Westy refused to give them so much as a poncho," one official commented.

But the CIA has its own resources, and the station chief ordered mortars flown in from Okinawa to protect the teams.

Westmoreland was nettled by this. Losing his usual cool at a U.S. Mission council meeting, the general reportedly asked the station chief: "What are you bucking for, corps commander?"

Westmoreland's view, according to reliable sources

was: "If the teams are so good, why aren't they in the armed forces?"

In the spring of 1966, it was suggested that the CIA get out of the Revolutionary Development business and turn it over to "open" operators like AID or the military.

But, by then, the station chief had decided that not only was the program successful, but it could provide an invaluable tool for countering insurgencies elsewhere.

He viewed the expertise gained as a training machine which could be readily shifted to places like Thailand or the Congo.

As one source said: "The RD program was forced down the agency's throat but they didn't want to cough it up again."

As of now, however, the Defense Department has taken over funding of the RD program, and CIA personnel at the training centers at Vungtau near Saigon and Pleiku in the Central Highlands will be replaced by military men or AID contract employers.

"I think this is a good thing for the agency's sake," one U.S. official said. "If the agency is going to survive, it has to be limited to clandestine operations—small, high-caliber, short-term, high-concentration efforts with a minimum of visibility. The RD program was not this kind of thing."

Whatever its successes in the view of many observers here, the role of the CIA in Vietnam emphasizes the need within the American government for an organization that can effectively combat so-called wars of national liberation.

The CORDS operation is organized somewhat along such lines. But it is a temporary expedient for Vietnam, and pacification chief Robert Komer has no referent agency in Washington, except the President.

Experienced officials here

